

Malefactors

by Houndeye

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Summary: The story of three people, one who was human, one who is, and one who might as well not be. The battle for the Borealis leaves behind two stragglers who must work together to survive. This is a work in progress and my first fic. Big thanks to everyone who has faved, followed or reviewed this so far!

1. Chapter 1

The Borealis. The Aperture Science icebreaker, stranded for decades in the Arctic sea ice. The bright red hull was perched between the twin crags of a tall iceberg, floating some hundred miles from the North Pole. Lost for many years, but certainly never forgotten. Standing on the deck of the aptly named Aurora, another icebreaker, Dr Judith Mossman broke into a broad smile when she saw the ship's name emblazoned across the bow, poking out from the berg. This was it. The prize that Doctor Kleiner so desperately wanted to recover and that Eli Vance had so desperately wanted to destroy. Why? She hoped to find out sooner or later.

An hour and a short helicopter flight later, and Mossman was standing, flanked by two Resistance members, gazing out in awe from the deck at the sweeping expanse of ice. They had plenty of work to do, as a detailed search of the ship was required. They decided, to conserve helicopter fuel, that they would remain onboard the Borealis for the duration of the mission. That night, Dr Mossman penned her first diary entry.

Day 1.

Lawes, Johnson and I have made a detailed examination of the outer surface of the ship. Nothing untoward so far, although the entire vessel is in an advanced state of disrepair. Davids and Odell have made a preliminary sweep of the lower decks, taking many photographs. Most of the passages and rooms on the starboard side are partially or completely blocked by ice or fallen equipment, either from some

storm, general decay, or something else entirely. At the present none of us have any idea as to how or why the Borealis became stranded on the peak of an iceberg, some hundred metres above the sea. Hopefully our investigations will help to uncover more clues. The team has set up camp in the rooms under the bridge, as these seem the least damaged. _

Day 2

_Using our Tau cannon, we have managed to carve a berth out for the Aurora in a nearby berg. We cannot afford to let it be spotted by satellite. We have begun cutting away at the ice on the second floor, but it is slow work and it may take some time to reach the cargo areas. _

Day 3

We have made a grisly discovery. Almost a dozen corpses, freeze-dried inside the hull, have been found in one of the storage bays. It is all very curious. How did they get to the bay, if the ship was tossed onto the berg by a rogue wave, as Odell believes? Were they all sheltering in there, and became trapped by the ice? We will surely find out as we open up the rest of the ship.

One week later

The black jackboots of Unit D-9 settled onto the slanted and buckled hull of the icebreaker. This enhanced combat soldier represented the peak of Combine gene manipulation. He was tall, over six foot, and clad in standard issue Elite body armour. No skin was visible under the puffy white torso, the red and black knee and elbow patches, or the imposing helmet. At the centre of the Cranial Protection Unit was an enormous single red lens that took up almost a third of the front of the helmet. Contrary to popular belief, the Elites had not been surgically modified to fit the helmet, instead using the lens to provide a clear uninterrupted view of the battle zone. Instead of the complex and cluttered air filters and equipment used in the gray and blue B series helmet that was Overwatch standard issue, the Elite's helm was streamlined, with two domes over the ears and a single port over the mouth that was both a filter and a vocoder.

D-9 hustled, half crouched, across the deck towards the nearest shelter. He hunkered down behind a hatchway cover, and covered the bow with his pulse rifle. More Elites leapt from the drop ship that swayed gently over the hull, fighting the Arctic wind. They moved cautiously, leapfrogging each other as they made their way down the length of the stricken icebreaker. Only the port side was navigable, as the ship was encrusted in ice and snow on its starboard side.

"_Bow clear."_

"_Stern clear."_

"_Centre clear. Advance on access hatches and proceed to lower floors."_

From here, the Elites split up. Several attached cables to the outer rails and rappelled down to the outside gantries of lower floors. More began to batter at heavy bulkhead doors and portholes, while the

rest took up defensive positions around the ship.

D-9 followed the others into the bowels of the ship. The interior was pitch black, illuminated only by the red light of the Elite's helmets and the occasional ghostly spear of light that found its way through the ice and into a porthole. Here and there they had to step over the desiccated corpses in Aperture Science jumpsuits that littered the concourse.

No door was left unopened, no room left undisturbed. The Elites covered every inch, taking photographs with their helmet cameras of every object they could find. Every corpse was taken out into the sunlight and laid in neat rows on the deck, where Overwatch medics began hasty dissections, picking out the best preserved examples for transport. A Hunter helicopter, equipped with ground penetrating radar, made several slow passes, mapping out the section that lay buried under the ice. The Combine swarmed over the Borealis like ants picking over a bright red cadaver.

The search continued for several hours. None of the personnel had been briefed on what it was they were looking for; in truth, not even those that had ordered the mission knew. Anything out of place had to be reported and documented thoroughly. So far, nothing apart from ordinary human technology had been found. The cargo holds, however, remained sealed off by walls of ice and other debris that had penetrated the hull in several places. Soldiers with thermic lances had already begun to clear these doorways. Drop ships swarmed overhead, dropping off and removing cargo and artefacts alike. The Elites were relegated to guard duty.

None of the Combine heard the drone of the approaching aircraft, it's blades masked by the thunder of the dropships and the circling Hunter helicopter. The Mi-8 leapt over the edge of the nearest iceberg and bore down on the Borealis with terrifying speed. The dropships scattered like a school of frightened fish in its path. A burst of machine gun fire spat from a pod on the helicopter's belly, and the Hunter chopper began to issue great clouds of smoke, wheeling away over the ice.

The Overwatch on the deck were quick to recover from their surprise, and soon the air was filled with projectiles. The Mi-8 swerved and wobbled drunkenly through the air overhead, occasionally firing on the soldiers beneath.

D-9 sprinted over into an open doorway, and into the ship. The bridge was crowded with soldiers, Elites and Overwatch. His radio crackled with frantic communications.

"_Overwatch requests reserve activation..."_

"_Confirm, hostile contact..."_

"_Request medical..."_

The radio faded, and a deep voice cut through the chatter.

"_Overwatch reports several boomers dispatched inbound, prepare for special enemy suppression and wrap up. All remaining units displace to internal high points." _

Outside, the Mi-8 wheeled around for another pass. It was badly damaged, having taking hundreds of rounds of small arms fire in the attacks. A burst of machine gun fire chewed up the flat stern, blowing several soldiers off their feet. The helicopter sank lower, heading for the rusted, faded square of steel that had once been the ship's helipad.

D-9 ran back to the bow, moving to a higher position on the superstructure. The Mi-8 settled, and two figures jumped out, sprinting over to the nearest hatchway. The first of the duo was a young woman of Afro-Asian origin, with coffee brown skin and deep green eyes. She wore a thick green parka and snow camouflage boots and pants. Her black hair, streaked with red, was tied back by a black headband.

The second intruder was male and of a similar age. He was clad from the neck down in an orange and black suit of hi-tech armour, with the Greek lambda symbol emblazoned across the torso plate. He had deep green eyes that glimmered from behind a pair of rectangular glasses. He had a small beard and moustache, and short brown hair.

D-9 lowered his OSIPR as the hatch groaned shut behind the intruders. On the helipad, the Mi-8 was wreathed in flames, crackling furiously as the last of the fuel burned.

All the noise and confusion of the upper decks vanished instantly as the hatch closed. In its place, there was only the deep boom of strained metal and the steady drip of melt water from the rusty walls. Alyx Vance put her hands on her knees, panting for breath. She gave a wry smile, and glanced up at Gordon Freeman.

"Well, that was kind of the Combine to give us such a warm welcome."

Gordon fiddled with the aperture of his chest-mounted flashlight. "Too kind. Looks as though they've only just turned up".

Alyx punched him on the shoulder. "Why is it that you only show up after the bad guys arrive? I thought heroes were meant to always be one step ahead."

Gordon smirked. "I don't know why anyone would say that."

He panned the beam over the walls around them. Ahead, a set of metal stairs plunged into the gloom. With Gordon leading the way, they descended into the hull of the icebreaker.

2. Chapter 2

Day 6

_At last! We have come across a safe room, marked with several important-looking packages. Closer inspection reveals that they are test samples, en route to a laboratory for testing. We have not yet opened these two boxes, as they are still very securely held. _

Day 7

_We have opened the boxes. One contains an amber crystal, approximately two kilograms in weight with curious refractive properties. The crystal also vibrates at a very low frequency, such that it is playing havoc with our equipment for communicating with Kraken Base. The second box contained four small objects unlike anything I have ever seen before. Each one is the size and shape of a playing card, and behaves almost like a butterfly, floating around the corridors whenever it is not contained. Each one is extremely thin, and strangely weightless. As of now, we have no clue of either of these package's departure or planned arrival points. _

Day 8

_Another safe room has been breached, this time containing only a single package. Inside was a small, mushroom-shaped object, made of a lightweight and porous stone. There are three small hinged levers made of an impossibly shiny material, like the first artefacts. As a precaution, and due to some of the labelling on the containers, we have decided to repack the artefacts and keep them separate.

_

_There only remains the hold area to search. _

High above, the final dropship swooped in across the icefields towards the smoky haze that veiled the Borealis. On deck, the half dozen Combine personnel that had not yet been evacuated formed a loose semicircle at the bow, weapons ready. The Nexus had known that resisting Freeman would only lead to greater asset loss, so they decided to withdraw, taking with them as much material as they could.

"_Confirm, last transport inbound to target. Airwatch is inbound. SkyShield is at periapsis, out of range for time zone. Standing by."_

The transport slowed, the container hatch bumping against the hull. The Overwatch personnel began to remove their equipment, passing it into the craft. D-9 made to go with them, but his radio began to emit a priority warning. He turned it on.

"_Overwatch Unit D-9. Nexus confirms that priority subjects are onboard target. Bodypack charge is onboard transport. Transport outbound of target zone in ten minutes. Deploy charge and extract."_

An Overwatch soldier leaned out of the hatch, and passed D-9 a large, silvery grey backpack. A timer appeared in the upper corner of his heads-up display, and D-9 ran for the nearest hatch.

Gordon and Alyx emerged into the ship's hold. The cavernous room was illuminated by several spotlights abandoned by the Combine during their hasty retreat.

High above, a set of long, spindly metal arms were mounted from the ceiling, attached to several small drum-like objects. On the floor, a set of metal triangles formed a large receptacle of sorts. In one corner of the room was a cage, covering a buckled and broken floor hatch. A small track ran from the cage and into the receptacle. Overlooking the scene was a small control booth, its windows smashed and broken. Alyx looked around with confusion, but Gordon felt a

horrible chill. Why was this so... eerily familiar? The cage, the booth, the track — why here? He steeped closer, and then he saw it, glinting in the darkness inside the receptacle. A beautiful, glittering, almost fluorescent orange crystal, marred only by a large scorch mark on its tip. Reaching over, Gordon picked it up, and held it towards the light. It seemed to thrum in his hand, the air around it shimmering with untapped power. Yes, just like the first one had. Gordon turned, a broad grin on his face... and threw the crystal as hard as he could against the wall of the hold.

The dropship patiently circled overhead. Peering through the observation scope, the Overwatch soldier mounting the pod's gun discerned a faint outline in the water near to the foot of the iceberg.

"_Check visual, vessel stern — shit!_"

With a sonorous boom, the foaming water parted, and a long, grey object breached the surface. A submarine of human design, with a low, narrow conning tower and a tall radio mast. As the spray washed off the deck, two figures came running onto the deck, clad in orange jumpsuits. They were heading to a large deck gun that was mounted on a pedestal at the rear of the deck.

The transport swerved to give the rear mounted Nexus scanner a better view of the target, and for a moment the Overwatch gunner was blind. When at last he could bring his gun to bear, it was already too late. The deck gun stabbed skywards, and the transport was sliced in two.

Alyx yelped, whirling around as the crystal shattered.

"Jesus Gordon! What the hell are you doing?"

Gordon ground the bigger fragments down into powder with his boot, then walked over, his face tense.

"Come on. We need to leave."

"What...but we haven't looked on the bridge or the rear quarters."

"That's the first place the Combine would have looked. The sub won't wait forever."

Gordon keyed his radio. The speakers coughed static, then a voice echoed out through the hold.

"Gordon? Come in Gordon."

Lifting his microphone, built into the back of his gauntlet, Gordon spoke.

"Right here Barney."

"Jeez Gordon, you had us all worried there for a moment. Listen, get to the sub as fast as you can. We can't hang around much longer."

"Did the Combine see you?"

"See us? We just shot down one of their transports! I thought they'd all cleared out a while ago, but they must have left some behind."

They took off up the staircase, the sound of their passage reverberating through the silent hull. Reaching the middle decks, Gordon and Alyx hustled through the empty rooms.

Alyx cursed. "Dammit. What was that thing you broke back there? It might have been important."

"Something that I think everyone could live without. Besides, if the Combine thought it might be important, they would have taken it with them."

They turned a corner into a dimly lit passageway, lined with drifts of snow. "We'll have to put this place under some kind of surveillance. If the Combine found something really important, then they would have already left."

"Good to see that someone else is having some bad luck today."

Gordon opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off when a figure came charging out of the darkness, cannoning into him and sending him sprawling. The figure banged hard against the wall, temporarily off balance. Alyx saw the outline of a pistol in the gloom, and tried to draw her own weapon, but bullets were already biting into her flesh, and she was falling...

After a while, the radio spluttered into life.

"Gordon? You there? What was that noise?"

"Oh shit Barney... Alyx is... something... I need a stretcher up here. Now."

3. Chapter 3

D-9 holstered his pistol, still running hard through the dark corridors. His radio could listen in on Resistance frequencies, and he had heard the earlier explosion from outside. Now he was truly isolated, with little hope of resupply, reinforcement or extraction.

What now?

He stopped, leaning against a metal bulkhead. The humans were planning to leave with a submarine, but there was little chance of him sneaking aboard or taking the vessel by force. The Overwatch had pulled back a considerable distance from the Borealis and were unlikely to try and retake the ship soon.

He looked down at the silver case still clenched in his hand. Some dark purple liquid had splashed onto the arming console, and was now dripping onto the floor. He turned his arm over, seeing more of the liquid spilling down his white body armour. D-9 felt his shoulder, then up to the back of his helmet " and felt something loose.

The Elite dropped the case, suddenly panicked. His combat computer ran a diagnostic program, and the results came back almost instantly. His Stim bladder had been ruptured.

All Overwatch soldiers come with a built-in Stimulant dispenser, that injects adrenaline and other boosters into the soldier's bloodstream during stressful situations. As a by product, all Overwatch personnel were in some way addicted to it, and deprivation could lead to insanity or death.

D-9's heart began to pound. The corridor began to swim in and out of his vision, and he sank to the floor, his helmet filled with flashing lights and wailing alarms. After a while, everything floated away.

When D-9 awoke, he felt strange. He observed the purple streaks that ran down his uniform, but felt nothing. He flexed his fingers, feeling them move under the gloves. Feeling faint, he began to slide back into unconsciousness, but at the last instant he rammed his collapsible stun baton into his chest, jolting himself awake. There were things to be done.

A group of Resistance members, dressed in thick parkas and snow camouflage, emerged over the side railing of the icebreaker. Gordon emerged from the bridge, cradling Alyx in his arms. Blood sheeted down the front of his HEV suit. He waved frantically to the rebels, and they ran towards him. They stretched out a tarpaulin on the deck, and set to work with bandages and painkillers. Gordon stood some distance away, chewing his lip in fear and frustration.

One of the rebels clapped him on the shoulder. "Gordon. You hurt anywhere?"

"No, Barney, I'm fine."

"Really? You've got some blood...wait, no some weird purple stuff on your face."

The scientist turned, and stared out at the horizon. He ran his hands over the butt of the .357 Magnum in his belt. "The Combine are still on board. We should probably go look for them."

"Combine? Nah, they've been gone for ages now. There's been no radio chatter, and the transports...c'mon Gordon. Right now, Alyx doesn't need you to run off and avenge her. She needs you with her."

Gordon turned back, and gave Barney a thin smile. "You're probably right."

D-9 hunkered down next to a shattered window on the bridge, and gazed down on the scene below him. One subject, possibly the Vance sub-prime, was wounded and lying on a tarpaulin on the centre of the deck. Two humans were giving her medical attention. Two more humans had returned to their submarine, taking with them armfuls of recovered Combine weapons. As he watched, a human wearing a suit of orange and grey steel strode over and knelt beside Vance. This was Freeman, and a quick scan of the purple residue on his face and torso confirmed that it was he that D-9 had run in to below decks.

Somehow, and for some unknown reason, D-9 felt as though he should leave the ship. But how? He was unarmed, save for his pistol. Glancing down, he remembered the charge, and a plan began to piece together in his mind...

4. Chapter 4

Day 9

_More bodies have been discovered, not all of them human. Five were wearing Aperture Science uniforms, one of whom was an armed security officer. In an opposite corner of the hold, a creature almost two metres tall and clad in a metal helmet and chestplate was found partially buried under snow and ice. It weighs over three hundred kilograms, and the presence of a third arm on its chest suggests it is a native of Xen. We have not yet attempted to move it, but this afternoon we organised a sea burial for the humans we have so far recovered. _

Day 10

We have begun to transport artefacts back to the Aurora. Davids has also managed to force the door leading to the bridge, so we can finally get at things like the ships log. We have enough food to last another six days, but a predicted storm will force us to leave early.

Gordon knelt down over the tarpaulin. Alyx, sensing his shadow passing over her, opened her eyes.

"Hey."

"Hey...uh...sorry."

She smiled.

"It wasn't your fault."

Gordon glanced down at her midriff. "Does it hurt?"

Alyx snorted. "Gordon, we don't all wear a hazard suit. Of course getting shot hurt. Lucky we've got some strong painkillers."

Gordon smiled, and stood. Barney had walked over, rubbing his jaw in consternation.

"We need to get going. The Combine are bound to overcome their shyness sooner or later."

D-9 detached the detonator unit from the Bodypack charge, rigging the device for remote detonation. He then leant the case against a bulkhead, and retreated to his position at the window. With him was an OSIPR pulse rifle that he had found discarded by the burnt out helicopter. It had been warped and badly damaged by the flames, but D-9 would not be using it as a weapon.

A few quick re-wirings later, and he was set. The rifle had joined the silver case back at the bow, now with a few after-production

modifications. D-9 unholstered his pistol and tightened his grip on the detonator. Any moment now. It was vital that the humans, and especially Freeman, were distracted, if only for a few seconds.

One of the medics waved to Barney.

"Okay Barney, we'd better go. Alyx should be good for transport."

Barney lowered his binoculars, passing them to Gordon. "Take a look. The Combine are still hanging around, about ten miles off. Thanks Gabe, we'd better get at least three to carry that stretcher."

Gordon scanned the distant icefloes. Vague shapes, some slow, some fast, flitted about beneath the fog. "What are you up to..."

D-9 squeezed the first trigger on his detonator. Below the thin decking of the bow, the energy ball priming system on the OSIPR began to whine.

Gordon lowered the binoculars, casting about for the source of the sound. To him, it sounded as though some aircraft was approaching, low and between the bergs. The whine grew in pitch and intensity, then, with an almighty thud, the bow disappeared in a cloud of billowing smoke and flames. He and the other rebels threw themselves flat, fumbling for their weapons. Only Gordon, assisted by his suit, managed to stay upright, the Magnum clutched in his hands.

Behind them, D-9 emerged from the bridge at a run. He dived forward, and slid across the icy deck towards Vance. She had sat up when the charge had detonated, staring out at the bow. Alyx's scream was muffled by thick body armour as the Elite wrapped his arm around her head.

Gordon, gun in hand, yelled to Barney. "We need to get off! That was some kind of Combine missile!" Barney was standing stock still, looking back towards the bridge. As Gordon watched, he raised his hands, removing his submachine gun from beneath his parka and laying it on the deck. Gordon spun, raising the Magnum to fire.

"_Drop the weapon."_

Alyx's frightened eyes peered out from behind the soldier's black glove. A Combine Elite was crouched behind Alyx, one puffy white arm coiled around her throat. Slowly, Gordon let the Magnum slide down his fingers, until it fell to the deck. There was an answering clatter from behind as the rest of the rebels dropped their weapons.

The Elite jerked his head at the side rail. "_Now, get out of here."_

Slowly, the Elite stood, dragging Alyx to her feet. Tightening his grip, D-9 pulled his pistol from his belt and dug it into Alyx's back, daring the rebels to make a move. Together, the pair began to inch back towards the bridge. D-9 pulled his captive in through the door, then kicked it shut behind him. The dull boom echoed out across the ice field.

Gordon hardly dared to breathe. "No. C'mon Alyx. Get out of there."

Barney slowly bent down, and retrieved his gun from the deck.

"Gordon, we need to go. If they hit the sub then we're all dead. You coming?"

Gordon clenched and unclenched his fists, staring daggers at the closed bridge access door. He had never felt so...helpless.

Barney's face appeared in the red haze that had begun to cloud his vision. "Alyx can look after herself! She's probably safer than we are! Now move!"

The Freeman gave Barney a look of pure venom, but turned and ran for the railing with the rest.

5. Chapter 5

When the Elite first pulled her to her feet, Alyx had fainted as the blood rushed to her head. The slamming of the bulkhead door brought her back, and she squirmed under his grip, biting uselessly into the thick glove over her mouth. The soldier dragged her down several corridors, a flight of stairs, and finally into what had once been the ship's infirmary. The hand was removed from her face, and she redoubled her efforts, but before she could get in a punch or a kick the soldier had thrown her down onto a sick bed and stepped back out of striking range.

Panting, she put her back to the wall and stared up at the Elite. "Well? Go on. You've got a gun. I'm helpless, I can't fight back. Finish me off. Do the Combine a service."

The Elite did not fire, but the gun remained levelled at her as the soldier drew up a chair and sat facing her. By the light of the Combine spotlight that still shone in one corner of the room, Alyx got her first proper look at her attacker. His armour was scuffed and battered, with a dried up river of purple fluid running down his left side.

D-9 looked down, and saw a patch of blood slowly spreading out on the floor under the bed. He stood, and tore off his Elite insignia patch, fashioning it into a makeshift tourniquet which he wrapped around Alyx's leg, all the while keeping his pistol pointed at her bemused face. What was he doing? Keeping her alive for something, like a more satisfying execution on the Overworld?

The soldier looked away, then made a small coughing noise. Clearing it's throat, she realised.

"_You are Sub-Prime Vance, Resistance member, and stand charged with criminal malcompliance and non-cooperation. Sentenced to death in absentia. Sentence to be carried out herewith."_

The Elite pointed to himself.

"_Unit D-9, batch three, City 13 Overwatch. Unit is charged with

desertion and betrayal of authority. Sentenced to death automatically. Sentence to be carried out herewith."_

The soldier fell silent. Alyx let the words sink in. Desertion? Betrayal of authority? This Combine was some kind of rouge.

"You're not...with them anymore?"

"_Affirmative."_

Alyx gave a derisive laugh. "Forgive me if I don't believe you."

The Elite shrugged. "_Unit has provided medical assistance. Unit has not used deadly force on Sub-prime or other malefactors."_

He pointed to his helmet. "_Unit is no longer under the influence of Stim."_

Alyx had heard of Stim. Captured Combine soldiers usually died within a few days from a lack of this drug, a purple fluid very much like...the stuff splattered on his body armour.

"So why are you still alive?"

The transhuman shrugged.

6. Chapter 6

With an almighty splash, the submarine breached the surface of the Kraken Base moon pool. Located some three hundred miles north-west of the ruins of City 17, Gordon had once likened the new home of the Resistance to Echo Base in Star Wars, where Rebels had fled following the destruction of the Death Star. Hopefully, this hideout would last longer.

A short, balding man in a thick parka and spectacles stood hugging himself on the dock.

"Gordon? Ah... I'm sorry. I heard the news. First Eli, then...it's almost too much."

Gordon made a short, exasperated sound. "Don't worry Doc, were working on it. She's not staying back there for long."

Dr Kleiner sniffed, and adjusted his glasses. "I'm glad to hear it. However, there has been an interesting development. Earlier, a small boat was seen drifting near to the moon pool entrance, only a few hours after you and Alyx departed. I had it brought in, and we discovered that it was in fact a lifeboat from the _Aurora._"

Gordon frowned, but Barney chipped in. "That old thing? The last we heard of it was almost a fortnight ago."

Kleiner continued. "We discovered that the boat contained an occupant. A man who may be able to shed some light onto the disappearance of our vessel, and its crew. Follow me, if you please."

After dropping off their weapons and equipment and changing out of

their cold-weather gear, Barney and Gordon followed Dr Kleiner back to his office. Inside, slouched on a faded blue sofa, was a man dressed in orange work overalls, wreathed in a cloud of cigarette smoke. As the door opened, he hastily ground out his light and stood up.

"Barney. Doctor. Pleased to meet you. My name's Odell."

Dawn came early over the Arctic icefields. D-9 awoke to a shaft of pale blue light lancing in through a frost covered porthole. It fell on the still form of Alyx Vance, lying on her side, still deep in sleep. For a time he sat and watched her. He was fascinated, entranced. He had never been so close to a real human to notice their full features, the subtleties in their skin, the way their bodies moved when they breathed. Most intriguing of all was the way a faint smile played at the corners of her mouth, an expression D-9 had not seen on a human before. So fragile, yet still they survived.

He felt confused, and needed to return to familiar territory. D-9 rose slowly, and approached his captive. With quick hands, he rooted through her pockets, retrieving two magazines, a knife taped to her ankle and another blade in her boot. He pocketed these, along with her machine pistol. Making sure to lock the door behind him, the Elite left for several minutes, returning with a packet of cable ties. Most of the plastic ties had degraded, but some were still usable. As much as he wished to show he was not a threat to his captive, she would still have to be restrained for both of their safety.

Dr Kleiner placed a small tape recorder on the coffee table, and turned back to Odell. "Right now. Let's start from the beginning Mr Odell. You left from Kraken Base a fortnight ago, is that right?

"That's right. Onboard the Aurora."

"And how many were with you?

"Let's see...there were ten of us, I think. Me, Chan, Phillips...Davids...those guys and that one girl from City 9...Rachael...and Dr Mossman. Would've liked to have had the Vorts with us, but they don't like the cold so much."

"Where were you headed?"

"We were heading for the last known coordinates of the Borealis, at _"

Dr Kleiner raised a hand. "Don't â€" we can't afford to disclose those kinds of secrets."

"...sure. Anyway, it still took us about a week to find it, despite all of Dr Mossman's careful calculations."

"In what state was the wreck when you found it?"

"Well, it was in an advanced state of disrepair...it was resting with its stern up out of the water, on quite an angle...the cold had helped to preserve of the Aperture Science guys, poor bastards...they had all been piled up in some of the storerooms."

Gordon shot Dr Kleiner a confused glance. "Odell, did you say that the ship's stern was sticking out of the water when you found it?"

"Sure. The whole thing was pretty firmly wedged in place, if you ask me. Though how it ended up on top of the berg is another question...what? What's with the funny looks?"

Gordon picked up a photo of the ship that had been lying on the table. It had been sent back just this morning by one of the scouts. Odell glared at it, his brow wrinkling in confusion. "No way...that sunofabitch can't have moved that far. I was just there â€" "

"When we went out there, the ship was completely out of the water. Half covered by the berg. "

"Hmm. "

Dr Kleiner leaned over, and switched off the tape recorder. "We'll finish this interview tomorrow."

7. Chapter 7

Barney found Gordon in the mess hall that morning. He was seated at a bench with several stern looking rebels, all of them staring intently at Gordon while he gesticulated at a set of blueprints on the table.

"...okay, so assuming that we can get the submarine around to the shallow side of the berg, then we can climb the sides in a couple of minutes. Good. Yeah. Great."

Barney hooked his legs into the metal bench, sliding over next to his friend. "What's up Gordon? Planning something?"

He glanced down at the documents. They were cutaways, blueprints for the Borealis. Barney sighed.

"Gordon, we've already planned this out. We've got people watching the place, they haven't moved. Alyx hasn't moved. We'll go in when we're sure it's not some kind of trap."

"Barney, we already know it's a trap. They've taken Alyx. Last time, I had her back in about an hour, and she will be frightened now, panicked, that I haven't come to rescue her! She needs me, Barney!"

Barney raised his arms. "Okay, okay, Gordon. I know you like her and all, and yeah, she is important, but you've got to give her time. You wouldn't want to get your girlfriend killed just running in there guns blazing."

Gordon reddened. "She's not my girlfriend Barney, just...just a good friend."

Odell clapped Gordon on the back, grinning cheerfully through a haze of cigarette smoke. "That Alyx is a tough lady Gordon. Hell, I'd be surprised if she wasn't already on her way back here right

now. "

Blinking in the harsh white light, Alyx stumbled out onto the deck of the Borealis. Behind her, D-9 raised his pistol and aimed it squarely at the back of her head.

"_We will review your orders. Prisoners are to comply with all captor-set regulations and boundaries. Subject Vance is not to attempt escape or direct violence towards her captor for the remaining duration of her incarceration. Respond affirmative if orders are understood."_

Alyx stretched her neck painfully. It had been almost three days since she had been taken prisoner on the ship, and she had lost track of the number of times she had tried to escape. To his credit, he had not demonstrated any of the unfeeling brutality she had experienced with the Overwatch back at the City 17 Citadel. Instead, he took long walks around the ship, only manhandling her when he had to. There had been no torture, no interrogation, only long hours of silence in the infirmary, sleeping or fiddling with the locket around her neck. Sometimes, she was allowed to accompany him on his restless patrols, but that privilege had now been curtailed. Every time she was near a window or out on the deck, she would strain her ears for the drone of helicopter blades, or the sound of footsteps. Once, last morning, when she had been alone, she had spied a figure, dressed in a thick parka, perched high on a neighbouring berg, glued to a pair of binoculars. She had not been completely forgotten, then, although her heart had sank when she realised it was not Gordon.

That night, with the door locked securely behind him, D-9 started off on his nightly sojourn through the bowels of the ship. It was a curious sensation, to have no directives or guidelines. He had resorted to adopting an authoritative internal voice, and he ordered himself about.

He reviewed the map of the ship he had loaded into his helmet. He had explored the engine rooms, the crew quarters, the bridge and even scaled the radio mast to get a better view over the ice sheets. This only left the cargo bay.

The lights in the hold had long since lost power, so he activated his ocular lamp. In contrast with the wind pounded, noisy upper decks, the hold was eerily silent. And more private. He too had spied the Resistance watchers, and knew that it would only be a matter of time before they had to be removed, for his- and her- safety.

Ahead, his light fell upon a thick wall of debris and ice that had fallen across the corridor. Next to it lay a pile of abandoned Combine tools. Evidently, they had only managed to clear part of this blockage before they were forced to flee.

It did not take long for D-9 to gain entrance, using a small portable cutting laser. Soon, he had carved a man sized hole, revealing a large, dark room beyond.

He squeezed through, sliding across the ice until he felt himself emerge. Standing up, he surveyed his new surroundings. The room was large, big enough to hold a dropship, and filled with numerous crates and storage items. The thing that struck him as most unusual, however, was the corpses.

There were at least a dozen desiccated cadavers, all dressed in faded Aperture Science garb, hanging by their ankles from the roof of the room. Most were missing limbs. Some of the packing crates had been opened and filled with snow, with yet more bodies visible inside.

D-9 stepped closer, his light falling on the nearest corpse. He was dressed differently from the rest, with a beanie, parka and backpack. Unlike the others, he looked dressed for the cold. His body was fresher and not missing any limbs. He was also, D-9 noted with quiet alarm, a member of the Resistance, and could not have been here for more than a week.

8. Chapter 8

"...well, Odell now for the important part. Your...escape...from the Borealis. What made you run?"

Odell took a long draw on a fresh cigarette. "Well, we had already been on the Borealis for some time, almost a week, and we had been fiddling around with some of the packing crates, you know, opening them up, just doing a quick check of the whole ship. Then, we managed to clear through some more ice and get down into some of the closed off storage areas."

"By this time, some of the guys had said they were...uneasy. It was the bodies, really. All stacked up like that, and inside locked rooms, too. Anyway, we were nervous as to what else we might find. We had planned to cut through to the final stores when...Davids went. He'd taken one of the artefacts with him...said his was checking something out. We had a look for him, but he never showed up. Like the ice had swallowed him up, Rachael said."

The Elite unholstered his pistol, and advanced with slow, deliberate movements. Beyond the corpses, a tall, rusted iron door stood ajar. D-9 drew back his boot, and delivered it a swift kick that shattered a porthole set into its middle. Pistol raised, ocular lamp brightened so as to blind any enemy, D-9 burst in -

"Then the others went, the three who went to look for Davids. They must have seen something, however, because we heard them screaming and yelling for a good few minutes. Again, no traces. By now, the rest of us were freaking out. Not Mossman, though. She knew that Chan could fly our chopper, so she sent him and Rachael down to the _Aurora_ to send out a distress call. We knew that would probably bring the Combine down on us, but we didn't care then. Shit scared, we were."

"Where were you when this was happening?" Kleiner interjected.

"I was on the bridge with Mossman. We both saw the chopper try and land on the ship - stupid really, we knew the berg was unstable."

"Unstable?"

"A big hunk of ice broke off. Must have been the rotor wash. Came crashing straight down through the chopper, and carried on through

until it landed in the Aurora. She didn't break, though; the weight just pushed her down until she... slipped away." Odell shuddered.

"Then what?"

"Well, after all of that, there was only me, Phillips and Dr Mossman. Phillips grabbed the doctor and pulled her out of the bridge, towards one of the rooms we used for sleeping. I went to follow them, but the door got blown shut behind them, and I heard this horrible grating sound...and I just panicked. I kicked the other door down and ran for the ship's rail. The whole thing was on a nice incline, so when I tripped up on a cable and went over the edge, the berg acted like a kind of slide, and in just a few seconds I'd slid about a hundred feet down the side of the berg, and into the water. Fortunately, I was close to where the Aurora had gone down, so before I got too cold I found a lifeboat and hauled ass out of there."

Kleiner leaned back, his brow furrowed in deep thought. "Did you turn back at any point?"

"There was a moment, about an hour later, when I heard a kind of...roaring noise. Lots of cracking too. The Borealis was obscured by another berg, but for just a moment the whole icefield was lit up by a brilliant green and blue light. I rowed around to get a better look, but it was too dark to see back that far."

â€" and discovered it was empty. This small room was, he noticed, a goods lift. He consulted the schematics. This lift shaft led from the store rooms, up through all the floors to the top loading bay and down to the bilge pumps a floor below. Judging by the absence of snow and ice on the floor, someone-or something- had been standing here recently. The roof inspection hatch was ajar, and D-9 looked up. The gloomy shaft rose away above him, but D-9 could see that the maintenance ladder was both free of ice and rust, but also bent and distorted, as if something heavy had climbed it.

It was then that he heard Alyx scream.

9. Chapter 9

Taking the stairs two at a time, D-9 charged back up to the infirmary. The screaming had stopped, but in its place was a loud hammering sound. Pistol held high, the Elite dived into the corridor.

The door to the infirmary was closed, as he had left it. However, it had been stove in by several terrific, sledgehammer-like blows that had buckled the thick steel. The creature that had applied those blows turned towards him.

It stood over seven feet tall, broad and knotted with muscles. A pair of clawed, birdlike legs with reversed knees and three toed feet held the creature up. It's back, shoulders and head were encased in glittering blue-black armour. Under its helmet, three tiny red eyes squinted at the intruder. The mouth was a pair of tooth covered flaps that opened sideways, and these folded apart as the creature roared in challenge. The third arm in the centre of its chest betrayed its lineage â€" this was a creature from the Borderworld.

D-9 quickly overcame his initial shock, and emptied a full magazine from his pistol into the creature's midriff. Instead of backing down, however, it lowered its armoured head and charged forward on its arms and legs, like a giant reptilian gorilla. D-9 rolled clear, and scrambled to his feet. His pistol was empty, and he stumbled backwards down the stairs, dodging a clawed hand. The creature snarled, and pounded down after him.

D-9 sprinted back down into the hold. His internal taxonomy database trilled, registering a match. *Xenotherium Myrmex*, a species of extinct Xen artificial life form, bred for combat. The accompanying photograph confirmed the description, though what this creature was doing in the Arctic...

The ice barrier loomed ahead of him. He considered diving through the hole and into the store room, but then he would be trapped, on the creature's home ground. D-9 set his ocular lens to maximum brightness, and cast about for a weapon.

Ice and debris flew aside as the creature came pounding down the corridor towards him. It squinted in the powerful light from the ocular lens, momentarily stunned, and D-9 made a sudden lunge, wielding a small blowtorch. The flames created nightmarish shadows on the walls of the storage room as the two soldiers, engineered for combat, fought for their lives.

Having lost the element of surprise, D-9 focused the flame on the exposed areas of flesh visible between the creature's gleaming plate armour. The Xenian squealed, but its bone-breaking grip did not relax, and it emitted a grating snarl of triumph as D-9 heard something snap.

From behind the creature came a loud hissing sound. The alien gave a great screech, dropping D-9 and clawing frantically at its back. There were several sickening popping and cracking sounds, and the alien began to thrash furiously, a faint light visible in the centre of its chest. Suddenly, a long, white hot bar of near-molten iron burst from its stomach, eliciting one last howl from the monster. It slumped forward, the air now filled with the smell of burnt flesh.

D-9 looked up. Standing before him, the remnants of a thermic lance still burning in her hands, was Alyx, having run the alien through with the powerful cutting tool. She took a step towards him, and in the flickering light, her face was a mask of furious shadows. The Elite was weaponless, and he could only watch, helpless, as Anticitizen Two extended her arm towards him, something long and black clutched in her fist.

10. Chapter 10

Alyx opened her hand, and let the black cable ties fall to the ground. Her hands were free. For some time, the human stood, staring down at the Elite, the scene bathed in the red afterglow of the thermic lance.

D-9 attempted to stand, but was interrupted by a shooting pain in his left arm. His helmet informed him that the limb was broken. He

slumped back against the wall with a muffled grunt of pain.

The Elite looked up towards his captive, and saw that she was holding out her hand to him, her face one of apprehension and fear, familiar emotions, but also one that D-9 had never seen before. He looked at the outstretched hand in confusion, and then took a tentative grip on it. Alyx heaved him up, and tucked herself under his uninjured arm. Slowly, captive and captor began to inch their way back towards the infirmary.

Inside, D-9 seated himself on the bed. His head was clouded with pain, and his internal bladders of sedatives and stimulants had run dry. He looked at Alyx again, her face as she tended to his injuries, and in a sudden flash a word was associated with her emotion. Pity. A word he had never had a context for, a feeling he had never expressed, or seen expressed. But here was a human, feeling pity for him.

Alyx sat at a corner desk, idly toying with the buttons on her parka. She was desperate to sleep, but her mind was still in turmoil about what had happened. The Elite had risked his life to save her from that...thing. She could have killed them both, alerted one of the rebels watching the ship, and have been back at base before sunrise, yet she felt she could not. To her, the roles of captive and captor had changed to that of...nurse and patient. The thought brought a weak smile to her face.

D-9 stirred, raised his head, reached behind his back, and produced Alyx's machine pistol. For an awful moment, the weapon was aimed straight at her face, with the red lens of the Elite visible through the sights.

D-9's helmet automatically registered Alyx's face, painting it with a swirling crosshair on his heads-up display. It would be so easy, thought the part of him that was not completely empty of Stim, to terminate the Anticitizen.

A quick flick of the wrist reversed the weapon, and he leaned out and passed it over, almost throwing it, as if it had burned his thickly gloved hands. Alyx instinctively worked the action, surprised to see that the soldier had not removed the magazine.

"...thanks."

11. Chapter 14

The prey had wounded it. Luckily, the weapon had missed most of the vital organs, which were situated in its cranium. He had been distracted by the white-suited puppet of the Oppressors, but attracted from his hiding place by a familiar smell. Yes, the smell of the Free Man had been on his prey, a sort of shared life-force that it could detect. It smelt other things on her, too. Vortigaunt treachery had aided her in the past. Slowly, painfully, it dragged itself to its feet. The Highest must take them, its mission must be completed. They would have their revenge upon Him and his kin.

"_This is Snowy Owl. Update on the Borealis situation. During the night there was something going on below decks. I heard banging, and

at one point I thought I saw fire." _

Gordon, Barney, Dr Kleiner and Dr Magnusson were gathered in the communications centre, listening to the latest reports from the team of scouts that were monitoring the stricken icebreaker.

"_Sorry to tell you this, Command, but before everything kicked off down there we were pretty sure we could hear a...woman. Screaming. Nothing but silence from the ship since about midnight, and there have been no new developments today. We'll keep you posted, Snowy Owl out." _

A deathly hush fell across the room. Those assembled glanced at Gordon, fearing another outburst. Over the last few days, Gordon had grown depressed, frightened for Alyx and angry at his own impotence.

When he spoke, his voice was a sharp whisper. "No more waiting. We will go now."

12. Chapter 13

Alyx gently shook D-9 on his uninjured shoulder. "Wake up!"

The world swam back into focus. D-9 sat up, and felt his right arm. Alyx had put it in a sling, and the cold of the Arctic night had helped to numb the pain. Alyx had been standing over at the unbroken glass porthole on the wall of the infirmary, peering down at something. From outside came the muffled clanking of metal on metal.

"That sound like your buddies?"

"_Negative." _D-9 scanned through the Combine radio bands, finding them silent.

Alyx swore. "Not that mine will be any better. You need to hide, or...or I could try to talk to them."

D-9 stared straight ahead. "_Unit D-9 will not accompany unless specified." _

The first rebel, clad in thick arctic camouflage, hauled himself over the edge of the ship, securing the end of a rope ladder he carried to the side rail. A second man, making no attempts to disguise his bright orange power suit, vaulted over the rail, cradling a shotgun in his arms.

Finding he could stand unassisted, D-9 hustled at a crouch out of the door of the infirmary and down the corridor towards the bridge. Alyx emerged moments later, heading towards the deck.

The ship was eerily quiet as the last of the rebel assault team vaulted over the railing and assembled on the slanting forward deck in a loose semicircle. Shielding himself from the biting wind, Gordon brought his shotgun up instinctively as a figure stumbled out from the superstructure, arms raised "€" but then threw the gun down, almost in fright, and running across the deck to embrace Alyx.

"Jesus, Alyx â€" Gordon grabbed her shoulders, looking her over frantically. "Are you alright? You still bleeding?"

"No...no I'm fine â€" relieved, actually."

"Me too..."

They stood for a while, holding each other fiercely, trying to reassure themselves. Around them, the rebels moved towards the superstructure, relieved that they would not be taking part in a hostage standoff again.

Gordon picked up his shotgun from the deck, and worked the action. "Now, time to find that sucker who-"

Alyx grabbed the end of the barrel, turning it towards the ground. "Don't. Please."

"Why not? He kidnapped you, tortured you..."

"Tortured me? Gordon, he's broken. A cornered animal. He's not with the Combine anymore, and he practically saved my life last night. Trust me on this."

"Where is he?"

Alyx whistled the pre-arranged signal, and D-9 emerged, slowly, shuffling across the deck, his good hand raised above his head. He could feel the eyes of the humans on him, could feel their guns being trained upon him, but he continued on, keeping his eyes fixed on Alyx.

Gordon shook Alyx off, bringing the SPAS-12 back to his shoulder. He looked at Alyx, her pleading, tired face, at the Elite now kneeling on the deck, and at the stony-faced rebels.

"Does it have a name?"

"He calls himself D-something. No name, just a number."

Gordon lowered his weapon, but at the same time motioned for the rest of the rebels to raise theirs.

"Soldier. What do you call yourself?"

"_Overwatch Unit D-9, Batch 3, City Thirteen._"

"Okay, D-9. Stand up. Someone pat him down."

In his helmet, D-9 worked furiously, cancelling the numerous proximity alarms triggered by so many nearby armed humans. This was it. Acceptance. He knew that they would not treat him well, but it would be life. He could not cancel his Stim alarm however, and as the rebels swarmed across him he fell backwards. Sky, cloud, steel, suit, briefcase, deck â€" then darkness.

Slowly, the submarine slipped back beneath the grey waters of the Arctic. Having collected Alyx, D-9 and the Resistance observation team, the vessel was now heading back to Kraken Base.

From his position atop an iceberg several kilometres from the Borealis, a Combine Sniper watched the rippling water at the base of the iceberg. Satisfied that the Resistance had left, the soldier keyed his radio.

"_City 13, this is Observance Team 3."_

"_Go ahead, Team 3."_

The soldier brought up an image window on his helmet computer, cycling around until he found a picture of the foredeck of the Borealis. Rapid blinking with his left eye applied colour filters and zoomed the image in on a white-suited figure on the deck, surrounded by Resistance members.

"_Requesting City 13 Personnel Database search."_

"_Granted. Unit A-45 cleared to access records."_

"_Search...Unit D-9, Elite designation."_

There was a burst of static on the line as the Personnel Computer cycled through the Combine archives.

"_Match found. Unit D-9 deserviced, cause of death unknown."_

The soldier's brows furrowed under his Overwatch helmet. An error?

"_Unit A-45 reports database error. Unit D-9 online, in Anticitizen captivity."_

Despite Gordon's protests, the medics had insisted that Alyx be placed in the submarine's infirmary for the duration of the journey, for treatment of her original wound, as well as hypothermia and burns to her hands. The supposedly rogue Combine had been shut away in the forward cargo compartment, under armed guard.

Gordon exhaled deeply, and continued his pacing of the submarine deck. He felt strange, almost naked without the familiar bulk of his Hazard Suit, and it was comforting to be behind at least some kind of metal skin. The thought brought a smirk to his face. The world beating, alien decimating Freeman needed a security blanket, albeit a steel one. Cute.

Something was still nagging him, though. That conversation with the crewman on the Aurora. The disappearances of the crew, the strange lights, the ship having supposedly shifted over a period of weeks. What was that all about, and why had they not seen anything like that while they were onboard?

The goal was in sight now. The Xen Grunt, blood still pouring from the wound in its chest, dragged itself through the silent corridors of the Borealis. Packing the hole with ice had done little to stop the bleeding, and death now looked inevitable. Yet this had not changed the parameters of the mission, only given them a new urgency.

In his clawed fist was clutched a rectangular parcel, swathed in strips of clothing torn from past human meals. The Key must be fitted to the Lock, it had been told. The Key must be turned, like it was for the brown haired woman and her companions only those few weeks ago. Fit the Key. Complete the task.

The Grunt stumbled into the hold, fragments of shattered crystal crackling under its hooves. Slowly, it unwrapped the cloth from the package, revealing a long box constructed from porous stone. Inside, nestled in impact absorbing jelly, was another Xen crystal, one that still glowed with the purpl flames of the Borderworld. Absorbed by its beauty, the Grunt briefly forgot his pain, and with a mighty effort slotted the crystal into the drive receptacle. Then, satisfied that the crystal was safe, the Grunt leaned back against the receptacle, emitted one last, rattling breath, then expired.

The Key had been fitted to the Lock. Now it had to be turned.

14. Chapter 15

Despite Gordon's protests, the medics had insisted that Alyx be placed in the submarine's infirmary for the duration of the journey, for treatment of her original wound, as well as hypothermia and burns to her hands. The supposedly rogue Combine had been shut away in the forward cargo compartment, under armed guard.

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The moon pool of Kraken Base was crowded when the Resistance submarine docked. Rebels, carrying experimental devices built by Dr. Magnusson's science team swept the hull for Combine bugs, both mechanical and biological.

Alyx, wrapped in a Combine-issue silver reflective blanket, stepped up onto the pier, where she was greeted by Barney and Dr Kleiner.

"Hey Doc!"

"Alyx, my goodness...I'm so glad you're alright. And Gordon," he added, as Gordon emerged from the conning tower of the sub. "I trust the mission was a success then? Alyx, you must tell me about your time onboard the ship. I must try to correlate-"

Barney put an arm on Alyx's shoulders. "Alright Doc, give the girl a break, will ya?"

Kleiner laughed nervously, and wiped fog from his glasses. "I'm sorry

Alyx, I hope - good heavens!"

A collective intake of breath had gone up around the moon pool. All stared at the hatch of the submarine as the battered body of an Overwatch Elite was lifted out, followed by several guards.

Gordon grinned at Dr Kleiner. "Told you I'd try and bring back something interesting."

15. Chapter 16

The order went out across every broadcast system and every secure radio channel. Flares were fired, message lasers shined out into space. From cities to outposts, polluted mining stations to lonely radio masts, the Combine Overwatch received their new orders.

Across the world, different orders arrived on the frequencies of Civil Protection. In the wake of the City 17 uprising and the new period of heightened Resistance activity, the resources " and the loyalties " of the organisation had been severely tested. This message from their Benefactors promised them new hope. Fresh weapons, supplies and a specialised training program from the Overworld that would help the collaborating humans to adapt had been set up in large camps, outside of the cities. Civil Protection officers were simply asked to leave behind all of their equipment and move to the camps. Thus began a mass exodus of Combine law enforcement from the cities, people who believed they were receiving an opportunity to finally make themselves useful to the Combine. Anything, they reasoned, to keep their families safe at home.

And in the streets they left behind, the Overwatch set to work.

For the first time in his life " the part of his life that he could remember " D-9 felt fear. As the last dregs of Stim left his nervous system, he experienced strange hallucinations. Bright lights. Pain. A machine, composed of hundreds of jointed arms, descending slowly over him. There were voices, too. Some indistinct and distant, echoing through the darkness of his mind, and some that seemed to create physical pressure when they spoke.

"_Try...new_"

"_Dead?"_

"_**Hmm...an unknown factor.**_"

"_D...9?"_

"_**TOOL OF THE OPPRESSOR.**_"

"_Saved...life, Gordon."_

"_**I will leave you be, for now.**_"

"_Dangerous...Alyx...careful..."_

"_**STRENGTH IN COOPERATION.**_"

"_Coming...round...moved..."_

D-9 opened his eyes. The ever-present beeping of alarms from inside his helmet had fallen silent. All gauges were filled, including Stim. He switched on his ocular lens, and peered out into the world.

16. Chapter 17

Gordon's room was on the 'top' floor of the dormitory wing, which itself was buried beneath the ice. He had a worn single bed in one corner, and a charging setup for his suit in the other. Various weapons were stacked up in his closet, along with the few clothes he possessed.

On the wall were several dozen photos. Some were clear, others blurry, but each had special significance to Gordon. They had been taken with the chest camera of his Hazard Suit, the controls for which he would accidentally brush once in a while. In fact, he had almost forgotten that they existed, until Dr Kleiner had taken the time to retrieve the memory card in the chest plate during routine repairs.

The first few were unidentifiable streaks of grey and white, followed by pictures of Kleiner's bespectacled face looming large in the fisheye lens. Then, pictures of the inside of the lab, clearly from when Gordon had worn it for the first time. Sometimes, faces stood out from the blur. That woman who had given him the airboat. Father Grigori, waving a shotgun in his direction. Out of all of these pictures, however, Gordon had hidden two underneath a loose ceiling panel. The first was of Alyx and Eli at White Forest, with her father gently punching her on the shoulder, laughter etched across both of their faces. Someday, Gordon hoped to have the nerve to give it to her, but so soon after the death of Eli was not the right time.

Gordon had been tempted to destroy the other picture on several occasions. The blurry outline of a man, silhouetted against a white rectangle of light. Dr Kleiner had deleted the picture, apparently without noticing it, but a Vortigaunt had printed it in secret and passed it on to Gordon.

The base tannoy crackled into life. "_Dr Freeman, report to the command centre." _With a sigh, Gordon slung his legs out of bed, pulled on his parka and stepped out.

Despite being around nine o'clock in the morning, the base was fairly quiet, as most personnel were scheduled for night shifts. Gordon walked swiftly down the wide corridors, nodding at others as they passed. A small group of newly arrived rebels stopped him to shake his hand, but he still managed to arrive at the command centre, the deepest part of Kraken Base, in good time.

The map room was crowded with people, and Gordon waved away those that offered him their seats. Alyx was leaning against the wall on the far side, and he moved to join her.

"Okay, Good morning everyone." The speaker was a tall, grey-haired man named Carter, who had become the de facto commander of the

base.

"As you know, Alyx is now back with us, and the Borealis is under Resistance control. So far, we haven't seen any attempts by the Combine to take it back, and according to scouts and radar the large concentration of Combine forces near to the ship has dispersed, although we don't know where to."

"This brings me to the second piece of news. Last night we intercepted a bunch of radio transmissions on an unsecured channel at our White Forest listening post. It sounds as though the Combine are performing troop reshuffles worldwide, including something to do with re-structuring Civil Protection forces. That's all we've got at the moment on that one, but for now we're just waiting on our spies in the capitals to tell us what they're really up to."

"You might have noticed that security has increased around here again, both internally and externally. Last night some kind of Combine space plane dropped into the atmosphere in the general area of Kraken base. Now, we know that these planes do drop in and out of orbit, but this time it hung around much longer than normal. I've ordered the long wave radio array shut down for the next day or so, and tonight we're gonna pile a few more inches of snow on top of the exposed sections of the base. As for internal security, I've heard a lot of rumours flying around about us having captured a Combine soldier. This is the case; however this has not compromised the base or your safety in any way. The synth is confined to the lab wing and will remain there for the foreseeable future. Any questions?"

17. Chapter 18

As the meeting ended, a Vortigaunt sidled up to where Alyx and Gordon were standing.

"If the Freeman and the Alyx Vance would accompany me to the laboratory wing..."

The trio made their way along a twisting maze of corridors that formed part of the old Kraken Base, established long before the Seven Hour War. Aside from the labs, which had been specially sealed, the rest of this area was slowly decaying. Here and there snowdrifts had leached into the corridors, and some sections had collapsed completely under the weight of the ice and snow that had been piled onto the roof as camouflage.

Dr Kleiner met them at the door. "Come in you two. Thank you, Uriah, I will see you later."

The Vortigaunt bowed, and retreated with a speed that betrayed his dislike of the cold.

The room was a mixture of pre-war human technology, including several workbenches and fume cupboards, and decidedly alien objects. On the nearest workbench, hooked up to a hybrid Combine-human computer, was a white object. Gordon found himself squinting at it in the bright light for several seconds before he realised what it was.

Kleiner, with some effort, dragged a pair of sturdy lab stools over to the bench, and he motioned for Alyx and Gordon to sit. He turned

the object around, revealing a white Elite helmet, scuffed and bettered, and streaked with purple stains down one side.

"Thanks again for bringing that Combine soldier to me, you two. Its helmet has divulged a substantial quantity of information which I believe will prove useful to the Resistance. I took the liberty of downloading files from the inbuilt camera almost as soon as it arrived here, and found quite a few interesting pieces."

Kleiner pushed his glasses back, and leaned in towards Alyx. "Alyx, would you be so kind as to tell me what happened the night before last? The footage seems to show â€" well, something I'd hoped we had seen the last of at Black Mesa."

Alyx pushed the monitor towards Gordon. On screen, a pair of gloved hands appeared below the camera, holding a pistol. Between the flashes of light that followed, the silhouette of a hulking alien creature was visible, looming out of the darkness.

"What...but...they should have all died."

Alyx looked confused. "You've seen these things before?"

"Yeah. At Black Mesa. The Nihilanth â€" that thing that made the portal between Earth and Xen â€" sent these guys through with the Vorts. I must have fought dozens of them, both on Earth and back in the Borderworld. It wasn't as if they were particularly smart, although they were pretty strong."

Alyx snorted. "Tell me about it. Thing was about to punch through a steel door and rip me to shreds before Dee stopped it."

Gordon looked up. "Dee? Alyx-"

"What? I'm allowed to talk to him, aren't I?"

Gordon sighed. "He's dangerous. D-9 stays under lock and key until we work out what his game really is. He took you hostage, Alyx. You can't trust someone who is so...concerned for their own survival."

...

Smooth, sleek and menacing, the Combine spaceplane hung in space like a hovering falcon. This vessel was the largest in the Combine arsenal on Earth, over a hundred metres long and weighing hundreds of tons. It had been dispatched to this remote spot, halfway between the Earth and the Moon, for a critical mission.

The spot chosen for the rendezvous was a Lagrange point, a spot where the gravitational pull of both planets cancelled each other out, creating an area of true zero-g.

"_Extra-Atmospheric Control. Vessel Tau-15 in position. Requesting ETA on insertion."_

"_Tau 15. Position acknowledged. Re-align on vector 6,4,9,9 and open cargo doors."_

Gas jets on the flanks of the spaceplane puffed silently, and a panel drew back to reveal a voluminous cargo bay. Seconds later, a battery of high powered lights snapped on, bathing the area around the spaceplane in a halo of ghostly white light.

"_Tau 15. Activate inertia dampeners and hold exact location. Insertion window has begun."_

"_Confirmed."_

Several silent, motionless minutes passed. The sun had disappeared behind the Earth, leaving the spaceplane alone in a tiny pool of light.

18. Chapter 19

Barney slapped himself in the face a few times, trying to get some warmth back into his cheeks. Patrol duty was one of the few things that made him wish he hadn't given up smoking. His vehicle, a captured Combine APC in arctic livery, was patrolling the Kraken Base perimeter zone, a rough circle that extended ten kilometres out over the permafrost.

The trip computer pinged, and Barney pulled himself up into the plexiglass gun turret to scan the horizon. To give patrol crews a break from staring out across the blinding vistas, the computer required that the crew halt at one kilometre intervals for two minute's observation, and spend the rest of the trip inside the cabin.

Barney put the binoculars up to his eyes, and panned them back and forth across the horizon. The too-bright landscape slowly swam into view, punctuated by the occasional icy boulder or fissure. Inside the cabin of the APC, the radio crackled into life.

"_Hey, Barney. Morrison here." _

"Yeah, go ahead."

"_Scout relief team is on its way back to base in one of the microlights, and they're just coming in to land now. They say they could see something out on the ice as they passed over the perimeter zone, 'bout a klick and a half from where you guys are. Some sort of weird reflection. Check it out, and then you can come in early before that storm front hits. Morrison out."_

The APC turned, and drove north. The horizon was heavy with cloud, and Barney hoped that they would get back to base before the blizzard really set in.

...

Tau 15 burst from the clouds, its hull still glowing cherry red from its high speed descent through the atmosphere. Engines off, the ship was in a steep glide towards City 14, and the Airwatch Nexus that lay on the city's outskirts.

Tires shrieking in protest, the spaceplane eased its tremendous bulk onto the runway. A set of magnetically charged rails acted as a

reverse mass driver, negating the need for drogue chutes and bringing the vessel to a halt parallel with the entrance to the Airwatch bunker complex. On either side of the runway, the huge Combine eleven-square mile radar communications array stretched out, the landscape studded with a forest of ariels and dishes.

Before the tire smoke had even cleared, a pair of hulking synths, poised on three legs, hustled out from their blast shelter and began attaching umbilical cables to the ship. Alarms blared, signal lights flashed, and squad of Overwatch soldiers marched out from the entrance to the bunker complex, and stood smartly to attention in two neat rows directly under the plane.

A pair of mechanical arms extended out from the underside of Tau 15, and reached towards the cargo bay. Reaching inside, they drew out a gigantic egg-shaped object, wrapped in silvery foil and covered in wiring and electrical instruments. The arms gingerly lowered the egg down towards the tarmac. An APC drew up alongside, towing a large trolley, and the egg was laid gently onto it. The soldiers attached restraining straps to its flanks, then the APC set off down the runway at high speed, preceded and followed by a pair of hovering tanks. The convoy turned off onto the main road that lead to the City 14 Citadel, and as they sped off three gunships took up positions behind them. For the Combine, no amount of security was too great to keep this new asset safe from the Resistance " and its former owner.

19. Chapter 20

The slot on the underside of the cell door clicked open, and a tray stacked with several plastic tubes was pushed through. Even before it had closed, D-9 had already lifted the first one to his chest cavity, shivering as the nutrient gel began to course through his veins. Hunger had become a critical part of his routine, and without his thrice-weekly cocktail of stimulants he had had to develop his own exercise routine in order to silence the muscle atrophy alarms in his head.

D-9 reached down, touching his toes before swinging his arms up to the ceiling, feeling the joints in his back crackle with the unfamiliar motion. His arm still twinged painfully from time to time, but the fibres in his arm seemed to have almost completely healed the broken bone.

D-9 leaned back against his cell door, pausing to catch his breath. Around him, Kraken Base hummed. His accommodation had no windows, but by counting his meals and listening to the rhythms of the Resistance personnel he reckoned that it was already after dark. Usually, he was let out at least twice a day, to pace up and down in the dusky half-light, but today he had been denied the opportunity. He had heard the guards talking outside. Combine aircraft, on the move nearby. Looking for something_._

Night time was uncharted territory for D-9. Transhumans dosed up on Stim only ever required twelve hours or so of sleep at the end of every week, hooked up to a memory replacement device to keep them mentally pure. D-9 had not used Stim, or seen a machine, for two weeks now. Now he required sleep, and with sleep came dreams, or in most cases, nightmares.

It was in times like these that the Overwatch soldier thought again of those first few uninhibited moments of freedom. Pain, fatigue, fear. Feelings that he was still coming to terms with.

But why? Why had he not died? The people who had examined him spoke of other captives who had died within days, yet here he was, suffering only the mildest withdrawal symptoms.

He did not know how long he sat there, slumped against the door, feeling his pale, naked head resting on his bare chest, ruminating about his experience. The guards outside left at some point, as their radio had fallen silent. Soon, the familiar hum of the base faded away into nothing.

D-9 did not notice it at first. A subtle shift in the temperature of the room, as if the Arctic winds had begun to seep in under the doorjam. Then he heard it. Breathing, deep and unhurried, unlike his own faint mechanical wheezing. Slowly, he looked up, and began to wonder whether the nightmares had already begun.

A/N: Hey guys! Sorry this has taken me so long, I've been busy with school. For those who have PMd me about the state of this fiction, I may be making occasional changes to earlier parts of the story, but anything major will cause me to end this particular "act" of Malefactors and possibly continue on in a new story. Anyway, hope you haven't forgotten where you were up to, and enjoy!

End
file.